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SUBJECT: VISIT TO ROTTEN ROW

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5 (b)(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: ZANU-PF Deputy Director for External Relations Itai Mach on November 5 told poloff that the party's national conference next month would likely focus more on economic and land reform issues than personnel/leadership matters. He suggested that informal and personal communications across party lines were fairly regular and increasingly cordial, but that the rank and file in both parties were lukewarm on formal talks. He emphasized that the ruling party still attached the highest priority to land reform and was committed to rectify errors made in its implementation. Mach indicated that Zimbabwe was "looking eastward" to hedge against its ossifying relationship with the West, even as it welcomed a role by the USG and others in stemming its economic crisis. He inquired hypothetically about the prospects of a waiver of travel restrictions for senior party officials to travel to Washington for dialogue. END SUMMARY.

December National Party Conference: Don't Expect Much

2. (C) During a meeting with poloff on November 5 at the ruling party's Rotten Row headquarters, Mach said that the party had yet to circulate a formal agenda for its annual national conference scheduled to be held in Masvingo December 4-6. He explained that national conferences generally were regarded as interim meetings between Party Congresses, the next of which was slated for 2005. Generally, national conferences did not undertake significant shifts in approach but could make new policies, subject to ratification at the Party Congress. Notwithstanding considerable public speculation about the conference's implications for leadership changes, Mach asserted it would revolve more around economic and land issues rather than personnel matters. Elaboration of the Utete Commission Report on Land Reform and its recommendations were likely to be spotlighted. The leadership would brief the membership on land reform's progress and plans for rectifying errors in its implementation. There would be some opportunity for feedback but the format was principally to be top-down.

Land Reform: Central Priority,
Work in Progress, Need for Outside Help

3. (C) Mach stressed the continuing centrality of land reform to the party's political platform. The issue remained an emotional one for Zimbabweans, especially among the rural majority. He said the party recognized that there were flaws in the implementation of "fast-track" reform and was sincere in its desire to straighten out errors and assure fairness. Assuring the principle of one person-one farm admittedly was proving a challenge despite the system's explicit requirements. In the meantime, the shifting of farms as the principle was implemented was disrupting productivity. (He himself was given a small farm at the outset of land reform, but was having to surrender it as a larger, potentially more profitable one had become available.) Complicating the situation was the frequent emergence of multiple claimants to single parcels. There were processes in place to regularize these problems but "mischievous" claimants sometimes ignored the processes, requiring police to sort matters out on occasion. Given the numerous claimants and large acreage involved nationally and the "complications of colonial legacy", some disruptions were inevitable, Mach concluded, but the government was devoting considerable attention and resources to minimize them.

4. (C) Mach asserted that the agricultural sector needed help from the international community. Produce was rotting in the fields as the "new farmers" lacked essential equipment and technology. He conceded that "fast-track" land reform had alienated much needed foreign direct investment and the international donor community. USG and EU sanctions on travel and investment contributed to Zimbabwe's stigmatization as an investment destination. Mach urged the USG to accept the necessity of land reform in Zimbabwean politics; to keep the politics of rhetorical scapegoating by

both parties in perspective; and to begin engaging constructively on Zimbabwe's economic reconstruction. Only if people were empowered economically could they truly become independent actors politically.

Inter-Party Relations: U.S. Can Help

15. (C) Mach lamented that his party did not do a better job of selling itself to the international community. He said that MDC members were guilty of many crimes of which they accused ZANU-PF but they had much better rapport with the international media and diplomatic community. The MDC's reliance on the media and international community to advance its agenda alienated many Zimbabweans and hardened ZANU-PF's view that it represented foreign interests more than national interests. He explained that ZANU-PF's culture was such that the party would not complain internationally about MDC misbehavior; to do so would appear weak and shift responsibility away from itself as the country's ruling party. Instead, it preferred to address such problems through the courts or negotiation; interparty violence was "unavoidable at times" but not the favored route and not always instigated by ZANU-PF in any event. MDC elements had utilized violence and intimidation since the party's founding, he asserted, and some of his own friends had lost their lives to MDC violence.

16. (C) Mach asserted that the rank and file of neither party strongly supported an inter-party dialogue on transition or power-sharing. He recognized that there could be some mutual benefit to dialogue but confidence-building was first necessary. From ZANU-PF's perspective, the MDC needed to work more for Zimbabwe and less for foreign interests. It should be more willing to engage on issues constructively as an opposition party, and not hold every issue hostage to a single-minded pursuit of change in government. He urged the USG to facilitate inter-party confidence-building by getting the MDC to take a more constructive and flexible posture. Echoing other party officials, Mach suggested that elimination of the USG's targeted "smart sanctions" would go far in engendering good will within the party.

ZANU-PF Views of the U.S.: Suspicion and Admiration

17. (C) Mach recognized the constructive role historically played by the United States in Zimbabwe and asserted that a potentially important role remained open, notwithstanding the animus now driving bilateral relations. He said ZANU-PF's leadership remembered the contributions made by the USG in breaking the impasse at Lancaster House in the run-up to independence and many were not as anti-American as official rhetoric would suggest. He said even the party's rank and file all admired aspects of the United States and wanted to travel there. Zimbabweans were envious of the American political system, in which winners and losers went about their business and respected each other even after bitterly fought elections. Neither ZANU-PF nor the MDC were there yet, he asserted. Aside from certain areas -- posture toward land reform and sexual orientation, he noted -- Americans and Zimbabweans shared key ideals, even if neither was able always to meet them.

18. (C) Nonetheless, comments about regime change and other rhetoric from Washington deepened suspicion about the USG within the party and were pushing the GOZ to a "look eastward" foreign policy, according to Mach. "Eastern" countries were eager to build economic relations with Zimbabwe but did not attach distasteful political conditions to cooperation as did the West. Mach observed that the United States had superior technology and know-how that Zimbabwe needed, though, and the GOZ remained open to a stronger relationship with the USG -- but only on "mutually beneficial" terms not dictated by the stronger party. USG travel restrictions against party and government principals remained an impediment to better relations, both because of the negative message they sent and because they prevented the leadership from making its case in Washington. Echoing party colleagues, Mach urged a lifting of the restrictions as a confidence-building measure.

"Hypothetical" Inquiry on Travel by Party Principals

19. (C) Mach asked about possible flexibility in the USG's travel sanctions, indicating that some in the party might want to go to Washington for dialogue with the USG or with international financial institutions. He emphasized that he was not asking officially but wanted to understand the process and legal limitations in the event that somebody may wish to make a formal request in the future.

Comment

10. (C) Unlike most party apparatchiks, Mach was willing to meet alone with poloff. Like those few party faithful who are willing to meet emboffs alone, Mach followed a formula of didactically recounting the centrality of land reform to Zimbabwean politics before shifting to a more engaging albeit sometimes disingenuous posture. We assume that he was carrying the water of his boss, the party's mercurial Secretary for External Relations Didymus Mutasa, in inquiring

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about waivers of travel restrictions. The inquiry may have reflected Mutasa's interest in opportunities for self-aggrandizement (he reportedly is posturing for the vacant vice-presidential slot) more than any calculated party effort to get principals to travel to Washington. In any event, we do not see the internally absorbed ZANU-PF as willing to engage meaningfully in dialogue with the MDC or USG yet, even if some party elements favor interparty talks and/or rapprochement with the West. We have yet to see evidence that the government's much ballyhooed "look eastward" policy is finding economically significant purchase with potential partners, although the GOZ makes domestic political hay out of supportive rhetoric from countries like Malaysia.

Bio notes

11. (SBU) Married with two children, Mach is from a rural township in Mashonaland Central -- ZANU-PF heartland. He said he was lucky to have an excellent A-level teacher whose efforts earned him a spot in the University, where he joined ZANU-PF. A party stalwart intimately familiar with and constrained by the party line, Mach nonetheless displayed candor in distinguishing between "politics" and "reality" during conversation and in placing the well-known histrionics of his mentor, Mutasa, into context.

SULLIVAN